NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Catholic senator in North Dakota challenges bishop's election letter

Maureen Fiedler | Oct. 25, 2012 NCR Today

North Dakota is considered a "red" state, politically speaking. But this year, the Democrats have put up a challenger with a real chance to win a U.S. Senate seat, Heidi Heitkamp, a former state attorney general. She is running against Republican Rick Berg.

That was evidently too much for the Bishop of Bismarck, David Kagan. He has published a letter that he wants read at all Masses this weekend that -- without mentioning names -- effectively endorses Berg over Heitkamp.

As you might expect, Kagan zeroes in on social issues, with no mention of poverty, economic justice, immigration, peace in the world or human rights. He maintains, "A properly formed Catholic conscience will never contradict the Church's teachings in matters of faith and morals."

Really? A conscience is an ecclesial tape recorder?

And just so no one misses his point, he lists some actions he believes "are never acceptable and should not be made so by law, they include: abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, and not recognizing the unique and special role of marriage as the union of one man and one woman."

Ironically, the Web information on Heidi Heidkamp says she has no public position on abortion and believes same-sex marriage is an issue for the states.

Now, a courageous Catholic state senator, Tim Mathern of Fargo, has rebutted Kagan publicly and called on him to withdraw his letter.

Mathern tried for a private conversation with the bishop before issuing a public media advisory, he says, but "yesterday, I was informed by Bishop Kagan's staff that Bishop Kagan would not be returning my call." So much for civility.

In his press advisory, Mathern corrects the bishop's erroneous teaching on conscience: "A Catholic owes a duty to listen thoughtfully to the Bishop, but if in 'good conscience' he or she cannot give assent, the Catholic must be free to follow his or her own conscience, which is the true moral responsibility." The conscience of a good and thoughtful Catholic, in other words, might or might not square with official teaching.

Mathern also notes that Kagan urges voters not to vote for the more "likeable" candidate. This is just short of using candidates' names. Media in the state have consistently called Heitkamp the more "likeable." Mathern says, "The National Republican Senatorial Committee is currently running an ad that says: 'North Dakotans think they like Heidi Heitkamp. ... You might *like* Heidi ... ' "

This thinly veiled episcopal electioneering comes close to violating the tax-exempt status of the Diocese of Bismarck. But most of all, it is flatly unacceptable for a bishop to be giving voting instructions to his flock. Kagan should withdraw his letter and certainly not have it read from pulpits next Sunday.

You can read both Kagan's letter and Mathern's response here:

NorthDakotaSenator Bishop [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/01/2015 - 21:39*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/catholic-state-senator-north-dakota-challenges-bishop-election-letter

Links:
[1] http://www.scribd.com/doc/111164416/NorthDakotaSenator-Bishop